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ABSTRACT

Broad changes in social values, as well as the raising of achievement standards by parents and administrators, are pressuring teachers to change curriculum for young children, with the result that children are hurried and hothoused. Early childhood educators are particularly vulnerable to criticism of their work, and this reduces their ability to repel pressures that may be harmful to children. To advocate for appropriate practices for the teaching of young children, teachers can and should: (1) build respect for the unique needs of young children; (2) promote the best interests of all young children; (3) gain support from other child development and early childhood professionals; (4) enlist parents in promoting appropriate programs; and (5) gain a voice in decisions about curriculum and instruction. (PCB)

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ERIC Digest

Hothousing Young Children: Implications for Early Childhood Policy and Practice

Tynette W. Hills

Young children are presently being subjected to accelerating standards for achievement. Their teachers are under pressure from parents and administrators to alter curriculum and instruction accordingly. This digest discusses the conflicts early childhood educators are experiencing and offers recommendations for action.

Recent proposals for educational reform have emphasized academic achievement and preparation for technological change. As a result, many parents and administrators are raising achievement standards for young children. Teachers are being pressured to alter curriculum and instruction, and young children are being hurried and "hothoused"—caused to acquire knowledge and skills earlier than is typical (Sigel, 1987). This digest discusses the effects of hothousing on early childhood programs, the conflicts early childhood educators experience regarding hothousing, and actions they can take to improve the situation.

Higher Standards for Young Children

The current pressure for young children to achieve comes from several sources. Parents pressure children for various reasons:

- —their own ambitions for achievement;
- —their own need for help with multiple responsibilities, especially if they are single;
- —anxiety about the uncertain, highly competitive futures children face.

There have also been broad changes in social values. Heightened expectations for young children may signal a change in the nation's view of children. For example, Americans may no longer see childhood as a unique period of development, requiring special nurturance (Winn, 1981); adult interests may have become paramount (Douvan, 1985).

Educational Reform

According to Katz (1987), when educational reform is applied to primary school and downward, the results are:

- —acceleration of formal academic instruction, for example, earlier introduction to reading and math, complete with texts and workbooks;
- —entry and placement tests for kindergarten and first grade;
- —standardized or other tests for promotion to first grade;
- —transitional or extra-year programs for children who cannot keep up.

Affluent children may receive an excess of "enrichment," such as special tutoring in the arts, and fast-paced educational programs. They may have to answer to high expectations for skills and knowledge. Children in low-income families also face more stringent standards in school and at the same time may have added family and community responsibilities. Such pressures may be harmful to the mental and physical welfare of children (Elkind, 1986) and deny them more fitting pursuits.

Impact on Early Childhood Educators

Those who advocate hothousing programs pay too little attention to theory and research. Complex developmental processes underlie concepts and skills used in primary and elementary education. Children must actively organize their knowledge, apply it to new events, and relate ideas about time, space, number, and persons. Accelerating young children forces them to rely on lower-level cognitive processes, for example, memorization and visual recognition of letters and numbers. This may stultify learning and damage self-esteem and confidence (Elkind, 1986; Sigel, 1987). Children must have time and suitable social and educational experiences to develop normally. It is short-sighted to trade human complexity and creativity for accelerated academic learning in early childhood (Minuchin, 1987). To do so is counterproductive for long-range educational goals.

Early childhood educators place high value on collaboration with parents. Thus it is especially distressing that much of the hothousing pressure comes from par-

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ents. Conflicts with parents over aspirations for children and expectations for programs threaten a traditional source of teachers' support. If children sense lack of agreement, their confidence in significant adults may be undermined.

Early childhood educators are particularly vulnerable to criticism. Society places a low value on their work. Other professionals lack understanding of what they do. Educators' programs are subject to administrative and parental interference. Educators tend to be isolated from one another and hampered in developing professional consensus on policy and practice. These circumstances weaken the professional influence of teachers and reduce their ability to resist pressures that may be harmful to children and to defend appropriate programs.

What Teachers Can Do

The widespread emphasis on accelerated achievement for young children, and the simultaneous devaluation of children's personal and social development, present teachers with urgent responsibilities. Early childhood educators must renew their dedication to sound practice and increase their sensitivity to social and economic forces (Hills, 1987). They should work to:

- *Build respect for the unique needs of young children.* Young children need protection and nurturance during a prolonged period of development.
- *Promote the best interests of all young children.* While some young children face demands for accelerated achievement, others face early semi-adult responsibility due to the absence of family or community support. Systems of child care and early education in our country must respond to the developmental needs of all young children (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1986).
- *Gain support from other child development and early childhood professionals.* Early childhood educators should conceptualize their work as part of a comprehensive system of care-giving and education that provides support for growth-enhancing environments.
- *Enlist parents in promoting appropriate programs.* Teachers must take special pains to work closely with parents, and to emphasize the importance of experiential learning, play and social experience while doing so. In close cooperation, parents and teachers are more likely to provide what children need for optimum development and learning.
- *Gain a voice in decisions about curriculum and instruction.* Early childhood educators are equipped by training and experience to recommend the most appropriate educational experiences. They must participate in making decisions about educational programs, balancing broad traditional goals of comprehensive child development with emerging needs. They must also articulate to parents and others the place of early education in the long process of children's growth.

Conclusions

To prevent inappropriate practices and advocate for appropriate practices, teachers should:

- be aware of reasons why parents and administrators urge acceleration;
- become effective spokespersons for sound policies and practices;
- ally themselves with other parents, teachers, and administrators who are committed to practices that best serve the long-term interests of children.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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